

**Board Minutes  
6 February 2015  
VA Regional Office  
155 Van Gordon, Lakewood, CO 80228**

Robby Robinson, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 0930 hours. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited and a moment of silence was observed for our POW, MIA, troops in battle or harm's way and all service members.

**Roll Call of Members and Introduction of Staff & Guests**

Board Members Present:

William "Robby" Robinson, Chairman  
Dana Niemela, Vice-Chairman  
Rene Simard, Secretary  
Kathleen Dunemn, Member  
Christopher Holden, Member- Not Present  
Duane Dailey, Member

DMVA Staff Present:

Mickey Hunt, DMVA, Deputy Director  
Reuben Mestas, CDVA Director  
Diane Ricci, CDVA Deputy Director  
Tamara Edmond, CDVA Admin. Asst.  
Gail Hoagland, DMVA VAG Administrator

Guests Present:

Renaye Murphy, Director, VA Regional Office  
Richard Sandrock, Governor's Office  
Rumi Britez, Intern, Governor's Office  
Debbie Blanc, Colorado Veterans Community Living Center  
Steve Rylant, UVC President  
Bernie Rogoff, Greater Aurora Veteran's Commission, City of Aurora  
Marvin Meyers, CBVA Emeritus, UVC  
Lisa McLaws, Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program-Denver  
Rossina Schroeer-Santiago, Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program-Denver  
Constance Tatro, Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program-Denver  
Catherine Dolan, Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager, VA Regional Office  
Mike Kubacki, Veterans Service Center Manager, VA Regional Office  
Elyce Girouard, Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager, VA Regional Office

Jim Zirulo, Vocational Rehabilitation Officer, VA Regional Office  
Andy Post, Acting Loan Guarantee Officer, VA Regional Office

### **Approval of Minutes from December**

Unanimously accepted

### **Board Member Comments**

Robby Robinson: The Board was represented last week by me and Dana at Military and Veterans Appreciation Day at the Capitol. I think this was my seventeenth year in attendance. I missed two in the nineteen years I have been going. It was a really nice day and there was a good turnout. The Governor was there and Maj. Gen. Edwards. The Legislators did their usual praise to the Veterans and military. I thought it was a very good event. Department of Military and Veterans Affairs put that on and they did an excellent job, in part due to the Protocol Officer, Janelle Darnell.

Dana Niemela: I was part of the Colorado Serves trip that went down to the San Luis Valley. I wanted to give a little feedback that we got from the Veterans Coalition of the San Luis Valley. I am really proud of that community from what they have done to organize themselves. They have some identified key leadership. There are perhaps 4-5 counties involved in the San Luis Valley Veterans Coalition, including County Veteran Service Officers, County Commissioners, and Veterans Service Organizations. They have put together these regular meetings with an agenda and are really trying to help meet the needs of veterans in their community. I think they could probably stand up as an example how a community goes from not being coordinated to getting it together in terms of the best interests of the veterans that they are serving. I think the feedback that I received from them mainly has to do with veterans having access to health care both mental and primary care, which is not unusual for most of our rural communities. The good thing about San Luis Valley is that there are a lot of private providers. The hospital system down there is willing to step up and fill the gaps in that area and they are really committed to serving veterans- even when they are not being reimbursed for the services they are providing. They are really eager to step up and meet those needs.

Some of the specific challenges that were identified are:

- trying to get in contact with the VA in person or on the phone
- not being able to make the 5 hour trip to the Denver VA Medical Center due to physical challenges in order to get the services that they need
- being able to access care in the San Luis Valley
- the ability to get appointments in a convenient manner.

The relationship with the VA seems to be improving. There was a Patient Care Advocate team from the Denver VA there to present what their program is and explain the process, and that they were there to help. They made mention that they were looking to set up a remote office down there. It would be a specific time and place where the veterans of the San Luis Valley could communicate with a Patient Care Advocate there locally. They were very enthusiastic

about it. The local community was very appreciative of that effort and I guess that we will look to see that it happens.

Duane Dailey: I attended the Northern Colorado Veterans Service Officer meeting a couple of weeks ago in Golden. I was very encouraged the way our town hall meeting in Granby in December went. A request has been made to see if we can have an outreach health van from Colorado Springs for medical and that door has been opened. It seems like an attempt is being made to do outreach and get out to rural Colorado. I am really encouraged.

One thing I have a concern about Channel 4 News on the night that Director Roff retired, they had a segment that inferred she was retiring due to the delays in the new VA Hospital. Correct me if I am wrong, but that would not be under her auspices anyway. She certainly did not have anything to do with any delays in the new VA Hospital. To me it gives an organization already with a black eye another black eye. I wonder if this is something the Board wants to address or put in a correction to the story that aired?

Robby Robinson: I wouldn't want to comment on that. They have a public affairs officer and I would rely on Dan Warvi to get that corrected. I imagine Dan is informed of any issues, so they would have to address that broadcast.

Kathleen Dunemn: No comments at this time.

Rene Simard: No comment.

Marvin Meyers: Dana spoke with regard to Colorado Serves. The Legislature at the Military and Veterans Appreciation Day on 30<sup>th</sup> of January held by the Governor, Representative Su Ryden, who is Chairman of the State Veterans and Military Committee in the House gave accolades to Colorado Serves and read a commendation for what Colorado Serves does. I wanted to mention it because Colorado Serves is making a significant impact around the state. My comments in regards to Mrs. Roff, there was a small article in the Denver Post on the editorial page today if anyone is interested.

Robby Robinson: One question I had about Colorado Serves in the San Luis Valley, does Frankie Muniz play a central role in that?

Dana Niemela: He does. He is actively involved.

Robby Robinson: Is he a kind of a lead down there?

Mickey Hunt: Yes, Richard Nagley is the lead with the veterans with the County Commissioners. That was my fourth trip down to the San Luis Valley. The first time I went they yelled at me for an hour, a very angry crowd. The second meeting was not much more productive. We had media people there. So now, they have actually organized themselves. They had sixty people in the room. They actually had a good decorum. After the two VA spokesmen spoke, they were applauded. I think they are serving the veterans of their community. I met the group from San

Luis Valley at the Military and Veterans Appreciation Day at the Capitol. One of my special friends from down there, Dorothy, a WWII veteran, who joined the military when she was sixteen, was able to come up for the day and she was thrilled. She asked me when I was going back to the San Luis Valley. They are meeting monthly. I will go back in the summer.

Robby Robinson: The reason I am calling that out is that I know United Veterans Committee gives awards out every year for outstanding veterans and individuals making a big impact in their community to serve veterans. I throw Frankie's name out because he is the only guy I know down there and he is a County Veteran Service Officer and he is doing a lot to help veterans.

Dana Niemela: I noticed that he was the only County Veteran Service Officer that stood up when they asked for County Veteran Service Officers to stand.

Robby Robinson: Was anybody from Pagosa Springs there?

Dana Niemela: I did not see anybody from there. I did see them at the Capitol. They brought a core team. Representative Crowder and the representative from Durango, Rep. Scheffell, both spoke very highly of Colorado Serves and the effort that is being made to help communities organize. I think that is the takeaway from that visit for us as a Board is helping encourage these communities to work together. I know in rural communities, there is only one way to get it done and that is by working together, making sure everyone is on the same page. From the County Commissioners, County Service Officers to health care working together. I thought it was really great that those two Legislators particularly from our rural communities to see the effort that is being made to work together. At the Alamosa meeting, they collaborated and had veteran representatives from Montrose there to talk about how they do business and best practices, and sharing ideas. It was really pretty remarkable.

### **Guest Presentations**

VA Regional Office Updates: Renaye Murphy, Director, VA Regional Office  
 Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment  
 Benefits  
 Loans

Robby Robinson: I would like to publically thank Renaye for allowing us to come here. For those of you who have been around for a while, in February of almost every year, we meet here and we have been doing this a long time. It is very helpful for the Board in doing this and for other people to get these annual updates of what is going on with the VA. We probably know too much about what is going on with the hospital because it is always in the news. But we tend to overlook some of the key elements, Vocational Rehabilitation, VA Loans, Claims Processing and other benefits that come out of the VA Regional Office. So that is why I asked Renaye to allow us continue to come here, keep up the dialogue and keep us informed. Thank you, Renaye.

Renaye Murphy: I will talk a little bit about what is going on here. I have a few copies of these VA Regional Maps if you will just pass them around. They are public knowledge and if you don't have a copy you can print one from [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) or google, "VA Regional Maps". So these are the new regional maps. The main thing I wanted to talk about today is the VA Regional Office. We do compensation claims for Colorado and for Wyoming. We have a Service Center up in Wyoming. We do vocational rehab claims for Colorado and for Wyoming. We do 8 state regions and we do the Home Loans. VBA also covers business lines such as education, pension, and fiduciaries. That covers what we do out of this regional office, but of course we have other business lines, insurance.

The big thing with VBA is always the claims backlog. We are working very, very hard to address the Claims backlog. The inventory of claims in the VA system nationwide is 502,606 claims that are down from the 883,930 claims in 2012. We have pretty much almost cut that in half. The backlog (defined as any claim that is over 125 days old) is currently 240,854 that is down from 601,173 claims we had in 2013. We have really been attacking that backlog.

We are back in mandatory overtime mode that started in January and all employees are working a minimum 20 hours per month mandatory overtime to process the claims and to serve those veterans. We have not sacrificed accuracy to process all of those claims nationally, or issue based accuracy (that is the accuracy based on?) with the backlog; our average accuracy rate is 96%.

This VA Regional map is related to the "myVA" initiative. The Secretary pushed this initiative to provide kind of a one stop shop, more integrated, more veteran centric services to the veterans. As many of you know, we have a lot of different maps for the VA. If you look at the VA Medical map for example, you will see all the different clinics and the VAMC's. If you look at VBA map you will see all of the different Regional Offices and those different Regional Offices fall under Area Offices. There are currently four Areas that all Regional Offices fall under. Of course, VCA (Cemetery) has their own map they have their own different regions to represent that. The "myVA" initiative is an initiative related to putting veterans first, and really improving processes and customer service so the veteran is in charge of his/her experiences and in charge of his or her own care. Just to give you an example: If you go to the hospital for an appointment, and you change your address at the hospital, then the VBA does not know that you have done that because our systems don't talk to each other and because we have all these different maps and all these information silos. We are trying to get rid of that. So, what we are doing is restructuring the whole country to try to put everybody realigned services into these five regions. There are 5 regions on the map and each region will be under a single authority, a single Regional Director, or single Customer Service Coordinator so those kinds of integrated services can happen. It can happen a lot faster and it will be much easier for you to find out what you are entitled to and much easier for you to get the services you need. So, that is the main thing that I had to talk with you about.

*Discussion about designated region and any changes that will impact the defined region for Veterans Affairs.*

Renaye Murphy: It is my understanding that each region will have a Regional Director that coordinates all services, VBA services, VHA services and VCA services.

Robby Robinson: The different VA computer systems - are they going to be able to talk to each other? A lot of that sounds like different technologies.

Renaye Murphy: Yes, that is the thing. That is the main thing that needs to happen. There are very, very smart people working on that. As you know, it is a process. You have to build the IT infrastructure before you can get rid of the legacy infrastructure. Supposedly there are some very, very smart people working on this whole integration thing. Because it is frustrating to change your address and have to tell three different people that you've moved. That is just one of the examples. Another example would be if you have a service-connected condition and you go in and get a minor surgery for it. The VBA does not know that the veteran had minor surgery unless you tell us. There should be something that kind of pings us and lets us know that happened.

Rene Simard: Is the DOD Health Integration System (HIS) part of that VA Health System Integration?

Renaye Murphy: The DOD Health Integration System is not part of "myVA" but it is something that we are working on with great strides, the DOD integration into our system. Now the DOD records push into our VBMS system.

Bernie Rogoff: With how the new VA IT program with consolidation and collaboration of different units that will speak to each other, Lynette at one of our meeting mentioned that one of the reasons that the scheduling was so poor, it was like 4<sup>th</sup> in the nation, the bottom from what I understand, is because we were using 1992 scheduling software. I don't understand having come from the corporate world how something can go 22 years and be so deficient and yet be overlooked? Where are we now with regards to electronic systems?

Renaye Murphy: I can tell you that the VBA Systems, all of the systems we are using for processing claims, and all of the systems that we are doing rules-based processing of pension and burials, those are all fairly new systems. Because I am not a hospital person, I can't really tell you what is going on with the VHA systems. I just don't know the answer because I am not a hospital person.

Steve Rylant: Some unofficial information about that, I participate in the Activation Committee Meetings where they are working on activating to the new VA Hospital. One of the big set-ups they are discussing there is the new software they are getting for scheduling. So they are working on it, but it is in there plan.

Duane Dailey: What is the anticipated timeline for the IT integration to take place?

Renaye Murphy: I am sure you will be hearing about that. We do not have the timeline yet. We know that it is coming as soon as we can possibly make it happen. We have not been given a specific timeline yet. We have been given the map and we have been given the blueprint. We have been given the communication plan to start talking to the employees about it, and to get them thinking along those lines of this integration but we do not know specifically where the Regional Directors are going to go into place and when specifically the integration is going to start.

Duane Dailey: I applaud whoever is doing that because from a corporate world as this gentleman said, when we serve our client, "the veteran" they have not a clue. And they are lost even though there is so much technology available to them.

Renaye Murphy: This is really just a paradigm shift in the organization and this will be the biggest realignment the VA has seen in many, many years. We know that without integration of services it is very, very frustrating for the veterans. Most people just think they are going to the VA, they don't know that there is VA, VHA, and NCA and we are going to try to fix that.

Bernie Rogoff: I am glad you said that because everybody in the VA was demonized by the polarization that was going on during the campaigns. So that VA already suspect by people who thought the VA was a terrible organization, good people were demonized by what appeared in the papers. That was unwarranted, really. We know that you are all doing wonderful work. We all know that the VBA and the VAMC are different and not everyone is doing that stuff.

Renaye Murphy: Are there any other questions for me?

Jim Zirulo, Vocational Rehabilitation Officer, VA Regional Office, Denver

Jim Zirulo: Good morning, my name is Jim Zirulo, Vocation Rehabilitation and Employment (VRE) Officer. We offer vocational rehabilitation services in accordance with Chapter 31. We have offices in Colorado and Wyoming. Our largest offices are in Denver and Colorado Springs. We have satellite offices in Grand Junction, Cheyenne, Wyoming, Fort Carson, and the Colorado Springs CBOC (Fillmore Clinic). I just put 3 voc rehab people there at the Fillmore Clinic. We have 32 staff and are in the process of hiring four more with a ceiling of 36 FTE. One of the employees that we are hiring is an employment coordinator for the Colorado Springs coordinator. We have 2 employment coordinators. I am going to talk a little bit about applications. We get about 200 applications for vocational rehabilitation per month and it normally takes approximately 5 days to process each application. So they are in the system in about 5 days.

We get them in for an appointment. We usually see each one of the applicants, most of them we see in group orientations for the larger offices and in the smaller offices we may see them individually. It takes us 35 days on average to make entitlement determinations on the veterans who apply for the program. Vocational rehabilitation is a needs based program and not everyone who applies is eligible to receive vocational rehabilitation. They may be eligible to apply but once they get in to see a counselor, then we find out they are suitably employed,

or maybe not employable for some reason, not everyone gets into the program. You may hear some people complaining, "Voc Rehab turned me down, blah..blah." If they are denied we have them ask several questions, such as, "Have you asked for an administrative review?", "Have you appealed the decision?" or "Do you have information on why that decision was made?"

What drives the program is each veteran has a vocational rehabilitation plan. I have professional counselors about 26 of them and they write rehabilitation plans with input from the veterans to take ownership of their rehabilitation plan. They come in and say I want to be an accountant. They come in and do some testing. We take a look at their aptitudes and abilities. Then, in most cases we write a rehabilitation plan. Sometimes the veteran will come in and want something that is not compatible with their disabilities. Legally, we can't write a vocational rehabilitation plan if that is the case. So we will take a look at other options if they are willing to do that. So veterans may be found entitled to the program, but we are not going to agree with the plan if it is not within the capabilities of the veteran to perform the vocation. We have 2,500 veterans in training programs in Wyoming and Colorado. So far this year, we have rehabilitated a hundred veterans. That is what this program is all about. We have an employment program. Our success is gauged by how many veterans we rehabilitate each year. We have about a hundred and I have 20 more sitting in my office. When veterans applied for the vocational rehabilitation program, the average salary of the veterans was \$572.00 per month and then once they have been rehabilitated the average monthly salary is \$3,240.00 per month. Sometimes, folks accuse Voc Rehab of spending a lot of money. It is important to realize that there is a return on investment (ROI) with these veterans. These folks generate tax dollars when they are rehabilitated. These tax dollars pay for the next veteran to come along. Our goal through the year is to rehabilitate 350 veterans. Last year, we were fifth in the nation and size wise we are not the fifth largest state. So, we have a really good employment coordinator, a good job market, and veterans are going to work. So, if you have veterans that come to see you looking for jobs, if they have a service-connected disability of 20% or greater, send them over to Voc Rehab. They can apply online. They can come to the Regional Office and apply, mail it in or fax it in. That is all I have for now. Are there any questions?

Dana Niemela: Jim, I think you touched on each of the points for eligibility for vocational rehabilitation, but can give a synopsis of the points of eligibility for Vocational Rehabilitation?

Jim Zirulo: They can apply at 10% service connected disability, but you have to be found to have a serious employment handicap. The majority of the applicants who are at 10% do not have a serious employment handicap although some are. They have to be within twelve years of their eligibility period or found to have a serious employment handicap. They have to have a disability and they have to apply within twelve years of the notification of their disability.

Dana Niemela: The purpose of vocational rehabilitation is essentially you have a disability that prevents you from being able to do the job you have always done. So you need retraining and new direction. Correct?



Jim Zirulo: Correct, we get service-members and veterans who maybe they were in the infantry, and there is maybe not much call for that in the civilian sector. Or, they have a disability and we will retrain them for a civilian job.

Dana Niemela: You mentioned there are occasions where the counselor may not agree with a disabled veteran's rehabilitation plan, can you give an example of that where a veteran comes in seeking a certain line of employment and it is not compatible with their disability?

Jim Zirulo: An example would be if we have a veteran who wants to pursue a vocation as a truck driver and he has a bad back and a bad shoulder with trouble lifting and he wants to be a truck driver then this would not be a good vocational choice. Then, we would take a look at other occupations that may be a little bit more receptive.

Bernie Rogoff: During the Korean War, I trained as a specialist in the field of radiology and nuclear physics. When I got out I went to the VA in New York and wanted to know if I could utilize some of those fields. I had been taking care of maybe 40-70 patients a day at that particular Air Force Base hospital. They said you have to go back to school in order to get recertified, get a degree in the field that you have already been working in. What are we doing now to evaluate that veteran, look at his MOS, so that we could determine if perhaps he could quickly transition to a job that he already knows a lot about. He is a valuable asset. Are you taking those things into consideration?

Jim Zirulo: I can think of one example that we have right now. We have an officer who retired as an engineer in the Army and he was never certified as a professional engineer. When he gets out, and has a service connected disability, we find him entitled to the program. What we are we are going to do with him, he already has his degree, he already has his experience working. We are going to provide funding for a refresher course to help him prepare for his certification exam, then he could sit for that exam, and we will pay for the exam so he can get a job in his career field.

*Discussion about vocational rehabilitation program and potential certifications through the vocational rehabilitation program. The Board discussed issue of coordination with Department of Defense and MOS transition considerations.*

Robby Robinson: The State has undertaken the initiative to help transitioning service members to obtain state licenses so they can work in their career field. For example, if a service member operated heavy equipment in the service, then the state would help him get a heavy equipment operators license based on military experience. They went through 140 MOS's or MOSC to see which ones could be translated to civilian licensure. As I understand, that is still ongoing, because they had a big push a few years ago. Which means VA does not even need to get involved, when you get out if you are a heavy equipment operator, come to Colorado, and you can be licensed as a heavy equipment operator. One of the other ones is a commercial truck driver, I know that is an example I heard last month. It is not just the VA, it is a State initiative.

Dana Niemela: Does this program tie in with the Post/911 GI Bill? Are they mutually exclusive? Do they work hand-in-hand? Do you have to be eligible to apply to one to get the other?

Jim Zirulo: Good questions. You can use one or the other. There was a law passed approximately 2 years ago that allowed vocational rehabilitation to pay the Post/911 rates. We had people that were jumping ship from our program to go to Chapter 33. A lot of these folks were seriously disabled and would have really benefited from having a vocational rehabilitation counselor working with them throughout their program. Once we write the Vocational Rehabilitation plan, we are not done with them. We are working with the veteran throughout their education/training, follow up with them through the job application process and check with them when they get a job to help them be successful. So we can pay the same rate as the Post/911. An example of this is if a veteran goes through vocational rehabilitation in a mechanic program and they get a job in a Harley shop, then we are going to help that veteran buy the tools he needs to be able to do his job. Chapter 33 is not going to do that, it is not the same as Chapter 31. If a veteran is in the program and they need a computer and it can be justified. Everything we purchase has to be justified. If we can justify it, we are going to purchase that veteran a computer through Chapter 31. The benefit to being with Vocational Rehabilitation is that we will work with you and check in on you through the whole process. The downside is that if you don't want to have to deal with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor throughout your education, checking in with you then the service member would probably just want to use the Post/911 GI Bill. So people are going to leave the program for that reason. They may say they just want to get their benefits like their buddy and not have to deal with Voc Rehab.

Bernie Rogoff: I have a sort of segue if I may, there is a young man whose father was killed in 2007 in Iraq by an IED. He has rehabilitated himself. He would like to go back to school. He now has a good job at Costco. Would you entertain helping a young man like that getting into a job program?

Jim Zirulo: In order to participate in the VA Vocational Rehabilitation program, you have to meet the eligibility requirements. Are there any other questions? Thank you for your time.

Andy Post, Acting Home Loan Guarantee Officer

Andy Post: Hi, I am Andy Post. I am the Acting VA Home Loan Guarantee Officer. I work in the VA Home Loan Guarantee Center. Our office is made up of three sections. We have VA Loan Production section, which is made up of VA underwriters. We have a Construction and Valuation Sections, which is basically our VA Appraisers. We also have a VA Loan Administration Section, which is basically our VA Foreclosure Specialists. Currently I have 82 FTE underneath me as Renaye referred earlier; I have a large section to deal with. I have Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado all in my jurisdiction. Two of the sections do have new updated systems that now work out of a national work cue. Our foreclosure specialists have worked in a national work cue since 2008. My underwriters just

went into a national work cue back in March. Our target is to move Construction and Valuation into a national work cue as well. Again, I have 82 FTE. Currently we have 6 vacancies; actually the Loan Guarantee Officer position is actually vacant. I am looking to fill three more specialists, or VA Loan Underwriter positions. Our SAH staffing position is open.

As far as out-based, I have eleven out-based agents and four employees, one in Alaska, four in Seattle, one in Idaho, one in Salt Lake City, one in Cheyenne, and just recently in the Fillmore Clinic in Colorado Springs, we got a SAH agent down there.

As far as Home Loan activity for the last two years, in Denver, in FY2014 we had 5,500 loans and so far this year in FY2015 we are up to 23,000. We have increased our output by 28%. So, basically the housing industry boom and then we had the nice interest rates, so everybody either got a home loan or refinanced during that time. Last year was pretty much a down year for us and we are now back to doing more home loans. In Colorado itself, we have already guaranteed over 7,000 loans for this year.

In our Construction and Valuation Department, we have a special section called Special Adaptive Housing (SAH). When a veteran is rated through the VA Service Center and eligible for the program, we have a special program where we can reach out to the veteran and have them fill out an application. We can go in and adapt their house basically to make it safe, sanitary, and more accessible. A couple of primary concerns when we go in to do that is to look for structural and adaptive safety changes to their homes such as access to bedrooms, bathrooms, and emergency egress/ingress to get in and out of the house. So far this year overall, we have approved 48 grants that have been submitted. All of last year, we only did 130. So, we are already at 48 this year with 46 of those grant applications were brand new and two were for subsequent use. The veteran once approved for a SAH grant can use up to the maximum amount, if that grant goes up or if they don't use it all, then they can come back and use it a total of three times until they reach that maximum amount that is allowed. In October, it just increased again the SAH went from \$67,950 to \$70,465 as the maximum allowable amount. That is a pretty substantial jump. So we do have a little bit more work.

So far this year, there are 15 pending applications for SAH grants in Colorado. So we have about 15 that we have received and we are starting to reach out and start that process going for them. If you guys have any questions, feel free to interrupt at any point.

As far as VA Home Loans, we are proud to say we have the lowest foreclosure rates out of any loans on the market. VA Home Loans have seen a decrease in foreclosures. Our VA Home Loan rates are at 1.56% and the Prime rate is 1.58%. Prime are the people that show up and throw 20% plus down on a house, they are the perfect credit scores, and they are the premier home loan applicant. Our loans are outperforming theirs. For fun, we always like to compare ourselves with FHA to see where they are at and FHA rate is 2.81%. We are really performing a lot better than those other loans. In Colorado, in just the past four months, we have had 349 foreclosures which are down from the last few years. The primary reason for these foreclosures is due to curtailing of income, i.e., when there was a dual income and the wife decided to stay home, there was a divorce or there was a loss of a job. But that does look like it is improving. That is about it, do you have any questions?

Duane Dailey: I have a question about Special Adaptive Housing contractors; do they have to be certified by the VA? What is the process for certification?

Andy Post: There is no certification required but contractors can go on an approved list. If a veteran comes to us and asks us who is on the approved list, we have a list of people we have worked with in the past to give them. We try not to get too involved in who they pick. We do recommend that they always get three different bids. Now, we do try to ensure they are getting the best bid possible. All of the bids and contracts have to go through the SAH specialist to make sure it meets all of the requirements and that there are no loop-holes in it.

Duane Dailey: So, the contractor once approved, what is the process for competing for that? Does he have to have a good record?

Andy Post: As far as the contractor? The veteran can act as their own contractor. It does not have to be any approved VA contractor. We have lists of ones we have worked with and ones we have good reports with. After we approve a list of what they are applying for, and when the job is complete, then we ask for the letter from the veteran letting us know if they were satisfied with the contractor. After a contractor gets so many letters of satisfaction, then the contractor goes on the approved list. Again, they can pick whoever they want. I had one in Washington, just recently who had his son be the general contractor and he reaches out to collect bids for all of the electrical and everything else. Again, we don't try to hold the veteran just to this list. We let them pick and choose who they can have work for them. The contract goes through our agent to ensure all of our veterans are not taken advantage of and to make sure the grant is fulfilled. He will give it the rubber stamp before it goes through my office. We have four levels of review before it is signed off on. We review all of the contractors as well. Once construction starts, our agent is following up on it to make sure everything is going well, to make sure there are not any bumps. You never know if you tear down a wall what you will find behind that wall. We always like to keep in touch and follow up with the veteran.

Dana Niemela: Are the Adaptive Housing grants only for service connected disabilities?

Andy Post: Yes

Dana Niemela: If someone purchases a home on a FHA loan and decides to refinance, can they refinance on a VA loan?

Andy Post: They can refinance to a VA loan, yes. VA loan is just a product so they can go through and get a certificate of eligibility and apply for it.

Dana Niemela: Is it used only for purchase or can it be used for remodeling as well?

Andy Post: It is only for purchase, they have to have the intent of living there full-time.

*Discussion on Veterans Affairs Home Loans*

Duane Dailey: You said they have to be service-connected. Are there certain exceptions for any veterans who are severely disabled or critical but not service connected?

Andy Post: Certainly not. It is written for service-connected veterans who need their homes specially adapted due to their service-connected disability. It is usually due to the loss of legs or whatnot. They have to have a service-connected issue. Are there any more questions? Thank you.

Mike Kubacki, VA Service Center Manager

Mike Kubacki: Good morning, my name is Mike Kubacki. I am the Service Center Manager. I have been asked to come and talk to you today about the overview of claims processing. I have brought my assistants with me, Catherine Dolan, Assistant Service Center Manager and Elyce Girouard, Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager, they are here to talk about the Veterans Service Center, Choice Card, and Digits to Digits, and answer any tough questions. I have a Service Center of 204 employees. Right now, we have 193 onboard. We are in the process of hiring more people, additional Veteran Service Representatives, Claims Representatives, and Legal Administrative Specialist for our Public Contact Unit down here and in Colorado Springs. We are currently going through the biggest transformation process ever in the VA as we transition to a paperless environment. Right now, we are 99.3% paperless at this time. So we are almost 100%.

When a claim comes in to each of the Service Centers around the country, they each have their own separate mailbox. The post office re-routes those claims to a central scanning facility. Ours is in Wisconsin. After the claims are scanned into a centralized mail portal, they will be reviewed by our intake processing center here at the RO. They are first reviewed by an intake analyst; we have two of them now. There are segmented lanes. We have two core lanes; one works exclusively for Fully Developed Claims (FDC) and the other core lane is for claims with 3 or more issues. We have two Express Lanes; both of the Express Lanes work for claims with one to two issues and also work FDC. There is a Special Operations Lane for tough cases if the veteran is seriously injured, if there was a clear and unmistakable error (CUE), for Special Monthly Compensation, if the veteran was a prisoner of war (POW), for military sexual trauma cases (MST), if they have ALS or Parkinson's Claim, or veteran dependents with Spina Bifida claims. Denver is the national processing center for Spina Bifida claims. There is also a Non-Rating Lane for claims that are not rated, such as Dependency Issues. There are 115 pending claims that need to go to PMR in Michigan, we have 36 processed. We are sending Dependency claims offsite to a private contractor. Appeals Team if you are not satisfied with the decision on your claim. If you are not happy with the decision, then it goes to the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA).

Discussion of VA Claims Appeal process.

Steve Rylant: Once it goes to BVA and they determine that the appeal is solid and approved, then what happens?

Mike Kubacki: Appeals Management Center makes the decision on Remands.

Public Contact provides support for both Internal Customers and External Customers. Public Contact takes care of walk-in clients; they do the letters for Colorado State Benefits and other VA correspondence. For the External Customers, we have Outreach Specialists, and we have a Congressional Liaison. We have representatives at Fort Carson and we have 3 employees at the Colorado Springs Fillmore Clinic (Colorado Springs Community Out-Based Patient Clinic at Centennial and W. Fillmore St.). We are in the process of hiring a Legal Administrative Specialist for the Colorado Springs Fillmore Clinic. The demand has been great down there. They had 800 interviews in Colorado Springs in January and we did 1,200 here.

BVA is transitioning to a national work cue. Colorado claims will come here first unless we can't handle the capacity but that is highly unlikely it will probably be where we take on claims from other states that can't handle their capacity. Are there any questions?

Dana Niemela: Do you have an idea of what the most common claims people are seeking compensation for?

Mike Kubacki: Hearing Loss is a big one. Sleep Apnea is another one, with folks coming out of the military they seem to be geared to file for those sleep apnea claims. Orthopedics and Mental Health are other claims we see a lot of.

*Discussion of different types of claims filed with the VA.*

Dana Niemela: Regarding the claims process for individuals with Military Sexual Trauma (MST), are there specific people who work those claims?

Mike Kubacki: Sure, we do have a MST specialist on the Special Operations Lane. I will let Catherine answer that.

Catherine Dolan: We have a female coordinator and a male coordinator to follow MST claims. It is important that they make personal contact with the veteran and verify if the incident was reported in service. They try to talk to them in person unless the veteran says they don't want to talk to anyone. We have both a female and a male Intake Specialist to work with MST claims.

Steve Rylant: You mentioned that Colorado claims and other state claims being processed in Colorado, are the Colorado claims being given priority by type of issue?

Mike Kubacki: They are processed by date of claim received. We have been part of the national work cue for several years now.

*Discussion about State Benefits and the BVA Process and what happens with Remands.*

Mike Kubacki: Most of the Remands go to Washington, DC; we are required to act on it in 15 days.

Rene Simard: What is required in Washington?

Mike Kubacki: I can't speak to that. Appeals are taking 260 days on average here in Colorado and nationally they are taking 450 days on average.

Catherine Dolan, Assistant Service Center Manager

Catherine Dolan: Good morning, my name is Catherine Dolan. I am the Assistant Veteran Service Team Manager. We are currently downstairs in the Public Contact area and have 7 employees and 6 of them are Legal Administrative Specialist that handles all interviews, all status of claims requests, the 800 number, walk-ins, State of Colorado benefits letters, and Chapter 18 requests: Spina Bifida Birth Defects Claims. Anytime a client wants to know about Spina Bifida requests, you have to call them back and let them know the eligibility rules for that. They have a lot on their plate, so I know the State Benefits letters are behind. Yesterday alone, they did over 62 interviews between 6 people. We have a centralized mail portal. So what happens is it gets downloaded to a centralized mail process, the State Benefit Letters are routed to the Mail Room and then uploaded to the Scan Site. Then they go through LAS to get processed.

We do 12 different types of State Benefit Letters (Colorado Disabled Veterans License Plates, Monthly VA Compensation Amount, Commissary Privileges ID Card, Widow's Commissary Privileges Letters, Benefit Estimate Letter, Small Game and Fishing License, Columbine State Park Pass, Colorado State Tax Purposes, Civil Service Preference Letters, Civil Service Preference Letters, Tax Verification Letters). The letters just don't stop.

As we become more transparent with e-benefits, we are also getting more IRIS inquiries where the veteran emails their requests. We are supposed to respond within 5 days to IRIS inquiries. We have almost 400 requests. Our job is to serve that veteran who is in the office right now. Especially before we had the Fillmore Clinic, they would travel all the way up from Colorado Springs. We want you to know we are trying to process those as fast as we can. In Colorado, there are different seasons for different things. I am from Seattle so I know about the fishing license. We are processing those and I want you to know we have 60 that we are actively working on. We are trying to clear them out immediately but wanted you to know why we are having delays.

*Discussion how to make the State Benefit Letters a more efficient process and potentially how the Board could relay this to the Legislature.*

Marvin Meyer: On the VA card there is a picture of the service connected veteran could you use something like that?

Ben Mestas: They have to know what the percentage is of the service connection that is what the issue is.

*Discussion of different service-connection percentages required to receive State Benefits.*

Catherine Dolan: We do have the Fillmore Clinic and business is booming. It is great for the veterans there in Colorado Springs because they don't have to travel an hour or an hour and a half when they would travel here. The Fillmore Clinic is turning out the State Benefit Letters left and right. If you guys have any more issues about the benefit letters, please let me know. If there is ever anything that needs to be expedited, I will give you my card so you can give me a call so we can make sure to get those expedited.

*More discussion on State Benefits letters process, and what the Board could do to help make this an efficient process.*

Ben Mestas: Just a real quick question about your Wednesday closing early at noon, what is the rationale behind it?

Catherine Dolan: We have IRIS inquiries with emails that we have to answer in an appropriate time frame; we are processing 30 claims per day. We need time to catch up, get them updated and in the system. We have power of attorney (POA)'s that need to be updated or changed. If you don't check a box in VBMS, then the POA can't review that file. We also do the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and the Privacy Act requests. We currently have 800 of those pending. We have to make copies of all of those files and a veteran could have an 11 volume file that needs to be reviewed. We can't take somebody off of production to make those copies, and somebody has to do the work. When we are doing interviews, by law a person has to take two breaks and a lunch. We have to have legal administrative staff to do the work when we have lunch. We also have to do annual training during that time frame.

*Discussion of requirements of the legal administrative staff and requirements of the Public Contact Office to be on the phone and respond back to veterans.*

Bernie Rogoff: I have a question and maybe it is not in your lane. I have had the occasion to call in on the 800 number and you have a message notice that if you have an emergency then dial 911 and then you also have a number for if you have a mental health issue or mental health emergency, the Veteran Suicide Hotline number, which is another number to call. Someone in that condition is not going to be able assimilate the number or to dial the other number. Is there a way for them to dial just one number?

Mike Kubacki: It is on the radar, this issue was brought up at a town hall meeting and it is under consideration.

Catherine Dolan: Are there any more questions concerning the State Benefits Letters?

Bernie Rogoff: You are doing a great job!

Catherine Dolan: Thank you. I know the employees are working hard and making sure the veterans get the best customer service. The Veterans Choice Card (VHA program) concerns



veteran's access to care when they are more than 40 miles from a VAMC or VACBOC. I am handing out a copy of the Veterans Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 Public Law was passed on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The Choice Program is a new, temporary program that allows some Veterans to receive health care in their communities rather than waiting for a VA appointment or traveling to a VA facility. This is a temporary three year program to bridge the gap while the VA expands their capacity for access. Approximately, 600,000 veterans were immediately eligible for if you are being told, "I can't see you for 30 days" and you live more than 40 miles away. There are 9,000,000 veterans enrolled in the Veterans Choice Card and the card rolled out on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The eligibility requirements are enrolled in VA health care prior to August 1, 2014 or the veteran is a recently discharged combat veteran. You have to have been told at your local VAMC that you will have to wait more than 30 days to be seen. They have to currently reside more than forty miles from the closest VAMC. So the 30 days start when the veteran is offered an appointment that is 30 days out and the 30 days starts when they are given the clinically indicated date. That is when the clock starts. The veteran is offered the option to keep an appointment or offered the Choice program. The provider must be in the third provider care network. The VA pays the Medicare rate and these rates can be negotiated in highly rural areas. If the veteran has other health care insurance then that insurance become the primary payer. If there is a co-payment that the primary insurance requires, then it has to be paid up front by the veteran. If it is for a service-connected disability, then there is no co-payment. If it is for a non-service connected issue and the veteran has insurance, the VA will notify the provider and they will bill the insurance for it. With prescriptions if they have urgent fill, they can be filled at a non-VA pharmacy and then submit a claim. With non-urgent prescriptions, the veteran can take or mail the prescription to the VA pharmacy or the provider provides the prescription to the VA pharmacy. If there is travel involved for the veteran that has to go to the Choice preferred provider, the Choice Act does provide for beneficiary payment for travel reimbursement to the Choice preferred provider. This is done through the VHA.

Bernie Rogoff: How does the veteran get travel reimbursement for these appointments? Do they have to apply for it or is it already in the system?

Catherine Dolan: I can't say since that is a VHA program.

Steve Rylant: It says on number 1, 30 or more days, and then it says or 40 miles from the closest VAMC. So it is not an, "and" it is an "or", right?

Catherine Dolan: My PowerPoint slide says 30 days or more and 40 miles from the closest VAMC.

#### *Discussion of Choice Card*

Catherine Dolan: They do have the website at [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact) you can go there and read all about for more clarification on it.

Robby Robinson: There are a whole bunch of things that are not covered with the Choice Card. It is also limited to the type of care.

Duane Dailey: Is there any thought on co-providers in my area, 44.44 miles to the nearest VA facility and then there is another one 36 miles, which is a problem. My providers when they call in they are not taking the Choice Card. The providers wont accept the Choice Card.

*Discussion of providers not accepting the Choice Card due to payment at Medicare rates.*

Catherine Dolan: I can't speak to that. I would just encourage you to let me know if you have any questions about the State Benefit letter or the Choice Card. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today.

Elyce Girouard, Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager, VA Regional Office, Denver

Elyce Girouard: Hi I am Elyce Girouard, I am one of the Assistant Veterans Service Center Managers. I am going to give you a brief overview about Digits to Digits. I am also going to talk about some of the updates to the Stakeholder Enterprise Portal (SEP). In terms of Digits to Digits, if you are not aware of what it is, it allows the power of attorney (POA) to submit claims to the VA on behalf of the veteran. The main difference between Digits to Digits and SEP is that in Digits to Digits it allows the Veteran Service Officers (VSO) to use their own proprietary software and it goes into the pipe. However, this is a one-way interface system.

Bernie Rogoff: Is this secure?

Elyce Girouard: Yes, it is supposed to be. We do have several users testing the software interface currently. They started that on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 and February 7<sup>rd</sup>, they have started production at the test sites. So far 18 claims have gone through. They are testing in Tennessee, Georgia, and Ohio. Right now the only claims that can be submitted at the test sites the 526EZ FDC claims. To be perfectly honest, Tracy Wise is our expert at this is out and I am just presenting for her. She headed a meeting earlier this week about Digits to Digits and they are still in the early production phase. We don't have a timeline for it to be used nationwide, but it is coming and they are testing and trying to work through the bugs or any type of security issues. That is kind of Digits to Digits in a nutshell. Are there any questions on it?

Bernie Rogoff: Do you believe it is an improvement over the SEP or what was available three years ago?

Elyce Girouard: I would say it is better than the 3 year ago. However, I am going to be pro-Stakeholder Enterprise Portal (SEP) and I will tell you why when we go through the updates. I think it is a better system and it is already in place. I know you guys like to use your own software but the Stakeholder Enterprise Portal, you go in and fill out the document that is already there then it goes right into VBMS. Now, it will show new updates with the culmination of the data that was received. The Benefits can go in on behalf of the POA and you can submit

a claim for them, you can submit documents for them, DBQ's, evidence, etc. so that everything can be viewed electronically. Another good thing about this portal is that if a veteran comes into the portal and they say, "I want DAV to be my representative, then if DAV has access to the system and they would be added as POA. It would put POA as a new update to the SEP, and then the POA can link to the National Call Center and talk right then about that claim or the specific veteran. Both systems, the documents that are sent into our VBMS, are supposed to be just in time however, there is a slight lag of a few minutes then it should be able to go to VBMS. Another great update to the SEP is that if you submit an informal claim, you know you have a year to submit the formal claim. When the data updates to SEP, if it is an informal claim then at the 90, 60, 30 day out markers, it will send a notification to give the POA and veteran a heads-up that the date to file a formal claim is pending. So, there is an internal tracking that gives the POA and the veteran a heads-up on what is coming. Also, there is a section, Veterans Message Serve; it will also send notification to the Veteran Message Center. We operate in a rules and process based system and when there are changes in the rules or process then these update to the SEP system. So, those are the updates to SEP. If you have any questions about the portal or Digits to Digits, I can take those at this time.

Ben Mestas: Actually, I would like to speak on the Digits to Digits part and why we as Service Officers would prefer the Digits to Digits. You are right in the aspect that you are able to transport an entire claim directly. And there is the capability in the future of webbing these programs together. But if we are working a certain method or technique, where we could bundle the claims, having the ability to bundle the claim and go directly to the VA without having to stop, fill out all those forms again, after we have gotten the veteran to sign them, and we have developed in our own database the ability just to send it would be helpful. It would save us from having to do the same job two times. I mean, that is why Service Organizations like the Digits to Digits concept. Like I say, the SEP program works really great, but it is time consuming for us to redo what we have already done. We like the ability to be able to see the stuff put in VBMS immediately as it is supposed to be when it goes Digits to Digits.

Elyce Girouard: We have only tested 18, so at this point it can't move directly into the system, I don't think. I definitely agree with you. I can see your point of view about having to talk to the veteran just one time. Maybe, it is just something that you can use in tandem, so if the veteran comes in and wants a change of address. You could go into SEP to change the address and then it is updated into our system. With the Digits to Digits interface, you have to give us the form for the address change that comes into our system then you have to let Public Contact know that you have updated the address.

Ben Mestas: When I talked to Tracy, her thoughts were when Digits to Digits and the SEP program were first introduced as concepts that they would be able to mingle as one single system at some point down the line.

Elyce Girouard: That could be true down the road but right now it is just a one-way interface. And it is not updating any of our systems right now.

Bernie Rogoff: So what would that do for you that it is not doing for you now?

Ben Mestas: Under the old system, we physically handed in the claims, they were worked here. It was a lot easier just to get things going on one stage. But with this concept it is going to basically put us all paperless. There will be no paperwork everything will be electronic. So we won't have the loss of paper claims, and we won't have the paperwork shuffling. It is a great system.

Elyce Girouard: As the testing moves forward, we will let you know any updates as they occur.

Ben Mestas: Tracy stays in touch with us; she calls me more than twice a week. She is very good at what she does.

## Reports

### Governor's Office

Richard Sandrock: Last week, the Governor, Lt. Governor, Maj. Gen. Edwards, and I were at Fort Carson on Tuesday for a listening session with a General from the Pentagon. 500 people who did not vote for the Governor gave him a standing ovation. This Monday, the Governor will be visiting with patients at the Denver VA Hospital. I will be staffing him for that. On February 22<sup>nd</sup> is Military and Veterans Appreciation Day at the Pepsi Center for half game, the Lt. Governor will be there to make remarks; a service members, veterans, and Service Family Member Organizations and their families will be singled out for service to those groups. They will be recognized for their efforts for serving those groups. Today, the communication department signed off on a quote from the Governor that we will be launching our "Veterans in Agriculture" program. We are hoping to collaborate with Western Dairy Association and Fort Carson Transition Assistance Program. Last week, I met with CSU President, Dr. Frank. He sees the value of "Veterans in Agriculture" especially rural agriculture not just green houses in Denver but in places like Sterling, Montrose, La Junta, Eads, and Lamar. He sees value to immediate jobs but also education for the future, to have more students eventually entering Colorado's multiple schools to get degrees in agricultural programs, saving their GI Bill for the time being. He will get a phone call in to the Vice President from CSU to see how he can help "Veterans in Agriculture" and get more veterans going into agriculture programs.

It has taken six or seven months, but I finally have a meeting with a veteran employment specialist with the AFL-CIO at their national headquarters. There are 4-5 million jobs in trades, good paying jobs, you can raise a family with; go on vacation, save money for college that goes unfilled every year. Once we get a little further with "Veterans in Agriculture", we are hoping to follow the "Veterans in Agriculture" program in the future with a "Veterans in Trade" program. I will be meeting with them in a couple of weeks.

Dana Niemela: Richard, I would like to be in on that meeting with you.

Richard Sandrock: Alright, send me an email and I will let you know the details. Lockheed Martin in collaboration with Fort Carson is looking to get veterans in to \$20 - \$25/hour manufacturing jobs that need to be filled. The jobs don't require a degree all they require is 4 weeks of free certification. They are now in the process of advertising these jobs to veterans and service members. They are saying if the veteran or service members know what they want to do, why not come to work and then use your GI Bill to get a degree in engineering, CAD, or drafting, etc. So, that is all right now.

Rene Simard: I wanted to add a comment. I was at the listening session and the Governor did a great job advocating for Fort Carson. It lasted over two hours, with folks, one after another, stating their support for Fort Carson. One of the scenarios is that 16,000 soldiers could be lost as part of in sequestration. Think about the economic impact, not only to Colorado Springs, but to the entire state of Colorado. I think it was a great message.

Richard Sandrock: Fort Carson's economic impact is approximately \$1.7 Million on the state of Colorado alone. \$8 Million statewide is what the estimated impact would be. DMVA is doing an Economic Assessment to identify the impact to the State. I think that goes out in April.

Mickey Hunt: That report is due on April 15.

Richard Sandrock: It may be higher than \$8 Million, we will see. Fort Carson, alone brings in \$4 Million in tax revenue to Colorado Springs, \$4 Million to the state of Colorado, and \$800,000 to Fountain. So there are large amounts of revenue that has an impact on Fountain- Fort Carson and the state of Colorado.

*Discussion of economic impact the military has on Colorado.*

DMVA

Mickey Hunt: Part of the Partnership Program, Colorado National Guard has been in a long term State Partnership Program with Slovenia and Jordan. So after the Jordanian pilot was killed, Maj. Gen. Edwards reached out to Princess Aisha bint Al Hussein, Maj. General of the Royal Jordanian Army and the military attaché to the Jordanian Embassy in Washington to express our condolences.

F-16's will be deploying to Korea next week as part of the Theater Support PAC. So the war is not truly over, and we will be going back to Afghanistan in September. A part of the Reserve Force is training to take the Chinooks back to Kuwait in June. They are really short-handed over there.

Dana Niemela, Richard Sandrock, and I will be in Fort Collins on Tuesday. The meeting will be at the Library on 4616 S. Shield St. from 3:30pm to 5:30pm. Our role is primarily to listen.

- 17<sup>th</sup> of February, I will be in Grand Junction, and go to the Colorado State Veteran Cemetery that afternoon.
- 18<sup>th</sup> of February at Joint Community Forces Meeting in Grand Junction in the morning

- 18<sup>th</sup> of February I was invited to, “Welcome Home, Montrose” in the afternoon and I have been invited to a tour at the Montrose VA Community Based Out-patient Clinic (CBOC).
- 19<sup>th</sup> of February, I have an office call with the Director of the Grand Junction VAMC
- September 22<sup>nd</sup> is the projected Blackhawk visit to the State Veterans Community Living Centers. It will be a two-day visit and I don’t have the exact dates but wanted to get it on the calendar first.

That is all I have. Are there any questions?

DVA

Ben Mestas: I have essentially 4 areas I want to discuss, and then Diane has something.

1. We are going to be hiring next week, 2 new State Veteran Service Officers, for the couple of vacancies we have had since August. We have some very strong applicants with some VA experience.
2. Colorado County Service Officer Training Conference, we are starting to get applications in from all of our counties and it is looking pretty good. If there are any other groups that are associated with it or you think would benefit, let Diane or Tami know so we can get them the contact information. That will be April 28<sup>th</sup> through May 1<sup>st</sup> in Colorado Springs.
3. Cemetery expansion is moving on as scheduled. They are talking about still by September to have the cemetery area completed. We are now in the process of getting the second columbarium ready to go. As Diane discussed in the last Board meeting, the use time for a columbarium is approximately 18 months. The expansion of these next four that are proposed will probably be good for the next six years. Hopefully. Once again, the use of columbariums is now becoming the preferred way of burial so we just need to keep that in the back of our mind.
4. Dick Gigliotti has informed me of his intent to retire at the end of this year. He has given me the tentative date of December 31<sup>st</sup>. I just wanted to let everybody know that the Cemetery Director is contemplating retiring by putting in his letter of intent.

Are there any questions? Diane has one issue she wants to follow up on.

Diane Ricci: I have had an update from the Colorado Department of Revenue. While they primarily brought up the DV plates, Mickey and I brought up my kind of personal issue the fact that I can’t renew my Bronze Star plate online. Tony got back to me a couple of days ago and said that not only my Bronze Star but every plate with a permanent award that there was a legitimate glitch statewide of why we can’t renew online and it is supposed to be fixed by the end of the month. I will follow through with him at the end of the month.

Duane Dailey: At the meeting, I asked him about the veteran designator on the driver’s license for free. When you have a CDL, you have to pay \$7.50 to have the veteran designator put on your driver’s license. They said yes, you do have to pay the \$7.50.

## Veterans Assistance Grant

Gail Hoagland: For the VAG there are no major updates. The sub-grants from the VTF are all tying together. For VAG, other than current expenditures if you remove a grant that was returned, then we are at approximately \$457,000 left to be expended. We are on track, that is about half of the \$970,000. For VTF, we have approximately \$387,581.83 left to be expended. This is approximately half and we are on track.

Robby Robinson: The grant applications are due March 1<sup>st</sup>.

Gail Hoagland: They are starting to come in. The combined updated would be I completed 3 webinars on training for the application process with about 100 organizations in total attending the webinars. There were more individuals because I encouraged people in the same organizations to gather around the computers rather than having several different people from the same organization logging in. Overall, the webinars have been exceptionally well-received. I have received quite a bit of positive feedback. The challenge, I think however is I anticipate more applications this year than we have had in the past. That presents the challenge of really looking at the applications, the recording tool, and rating the applications. It means that it is more likely that there will be more applications that are not funded. So that does present some challenge. People that attended the webinars were very enthusiastic that once selections are made for all new grantees there will be continuing webinar sessions training them on what you need to do to get reimbursement and those types of things. As well as receive a grantee handbook. That has been like two thumbs up to the training.

Bernie Rogoff: Where can I find the application?

Gail Hoagland: You can look on our website at [www.colorado.gov/vets](http://www.colorado.gov/vets) which is the DVA's website. Unfortunately, you have to look under State Services tab, and use the drop down menu to go to Grants and Trusts. You can also find the VTF application under the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs Section. I have posted the policy letters for programs, the grant applications. You can also find the PowerPoint from the webinars. There is also a draft form of the potential survey that they are going to be asking the grantees to fill out. I also presented at the American Legion Half Yearly Conference. I had a mixed response there. Half of the room was very supportive and half of the room was exceptionally angry about the changes.

Richard Sandrock: Was it logical anger or because they aren't getting any more money angry?

Gail Hoagland: Both.

Steve Rylant: What I have heard it is due to the increased amount of documentation that they have to do. They are volunteers and they have to use more of their volunteer time, am I right?

Gail Hoagland: I think in terms of reimbursement being that they think they don't have to submit anything ever to justify the use of the money or a cover spreadsheet asking for it. They are required to provide documentation for expenditures and also they will have to provide the surveys where veterans have to check 5 boxes. It is freaking people out a little bit. As far as the application itself, there was some grumbling about the application process being more complicated than it has been in the past years. This is troubling to some people. And it was very split because half of the room was very supporting and the other half of the room was not.

One other thing to pass on to you, I just got notified through Catholic Charities that St. Joseph's, a transitional housing program is for veterans. The Catholic Church is requesting the property back. I don't know the exact timeline but Catholic Charities has made the determination that they are committed to helping veterans in transitional housing and at the very least; the veterans will be moved to Samaritan's House which is obviously not the best option. I think they are also looking at some other options.

Bernie Rogoff: Were you notified of what they are going to do with the property?

Gail Hoagland: I was just notified of that yesterday and quite frankly, I think it is Catholic Charities property. I think they are in the initial stages of trying to sort that through. Perhaps there are ways that we might lend support when they are in a position of re-looking at that.

Duane Dailey: How many veterans are in that facility?

Gail Hoagland: I think it is actually somewhere close to twenty but don't quote me.

Dana Niemela: I work very closely with St. Joseph's Veterans Home. They are a partner of ours. I run a Department of Labor funded program to help get homeless veterans jobs. This is one of the better facilities that we have in our community. It is clean. It is quite. It is a beautiful facility. It has a great staff. This is a good program; they volunteer and get out in the community. I hate to see them be relocated to anywhere else.

Gail Hoagland: I absolutely agree but apparently the Church has made other decisions about it. Those are my updates.

Steve Rylant: I have a question. Gail, in the past we were able to use direct deposit for money and the system was broken about 3-4 months ago. I thought it was being fixed. Is it close to being fixed so you can do direct deposit back again?

Gail Hoagland: Not yet. What I am hearing, is that it has been put on a total hold right now until they can get the complete section done. At least that is what I am told. I do not have a timeline.

Robby Robinson: It is a statewide system issue; it has to do with the accounting program, C.O.R.E.



*Discussion of C.O.R.E. the State Finance and Accounting computer system.*

## **Public Comments**

Rossina Schroeer-Santiago, Homeless Veteran's Reintegration Program (HVRP)

Rossina Schroeer-Santiago: We are from the Homeless Veteran's Reintegration Program. I will just pass these out to everybody here. You guys are also our community partnering agency, and leadership in that agency. Our primary purpose of our program is that we are the employment arm of the Department of Labor Grant funded program that works to get veterans reintegrated back into the workforce. My colleague here, Constance, she is our Community Resource Navigator so we have this big collaboration that we do in the office. The primary thing we work on is removing barriers to employment that our homeless veterans or imminently homeless veterans are encountering. So Constance does a lot of the front end work which may include removing barriers to housing, removing barriers to resources, removing barriers to access, clothing, food benefits, and things like that. The nice thing about where we are located because we are located in the Denver Department of Human Services so this helps us to help veterans cut through red tape. We have good relationships with VA eligibility, housing, disability, the old age pension program and things like that. Once they are done with Constance, they kind of shift over to me.

I do the Employment Counseling. What I really work to do with the client is to hone in on focusing on a targeted job application process. This is something that not all agencies are able to do but because we are an intensive case management type program, we are able to sit down with clients, look at their employment history, similar to what the voc rehab program does. I am able to help them reconstruct resumes and help them rebrand, and explain how the job market has changed and trends like that. I help them go through the application process and help them get back out there. This is a really integrated approach and a collaborative approach. We don't do the work for the veteran but we show them how so they will be able to do it again for themselves. We come from a very strength-based approach as far as working with the client's interests. We believe that working from what they are interested in and what their job experience has been in the past and we build that back up. We can get them something that is going to be long-term sustainable employment. Something that is going to give them the income that is not just \$9 or \$10 but looking \$15 plus. So that is the goal of our program. If you have veterans that you know or as you are out there dealing with other agencies in contact with homeless veterans or imminently homeless veterans, please make sure to let them know we are a community partner and that we are there to provide those services.

Robby Robinson: This is a statewide program but you are from the Denver Office, right?

Rossina Schroeer-Santiago: Yes, that is correct.

Robby Robinson: Are there any other comments?

Steve Rylant: United Veterans Committee (UVC) meets on Tuesday, February 10<sup>th</sup> at the VFW Post 9644. It will be held in the usual place. The speaker sections we will have an update on the new VA Hospital construction from Kevin Lindsay (the Executive on the VA Construction site), Robert Michaels (Chief of Construction Division), US Army Corp of Engineers, Celeste Davis, Hewitt Turner, and Brad McCullum (VA Hospital Activation Committee Chairman). So, I figure it is going to be pretty good. This is a good team and they really do seem to be working as a team together.

### **Future Meetings**

March 6<sup>th</sup>, Pikes Peak Community College, Veteran's Center, 5675 S. Academy Blvd, Colorado Springs, CO 80906

April 1<sup>st</sup>, Denver

May 1<sup>st</sup>, Overlaps with CVSO Training Conference, Grant Meeting, TBA

June 5<sup>th</sup>, Grand County, Board Elections

Robby Robinson: We need to have a Grants Subcommittee, let me know if you want to volunteer. (Dana Niemela, Rene Simard, Duane Dailey, and Ben Mestas volunteered.)

Gail Hoagland: You need to read the applications prior to the Grant Subcommittee meeting and score them. I will get you copies in advance.

*Discussion on Grant Subcommittee and scoring the applications. Also, discussed Board visit to CVSO Training Conference*

### **Old Business**

### **New Business**

Robby Robinson: The Audit Review meeting has been moved to March 10<sup>th</sup> 2015. The Senate Confirmation Hearings will be on February 11<sup>th</sup> at 1:30pm at the Capitol. Most of the Board knows that Wendy Chiado elected to resign from the Board.

Meeting adjourned 11:40am

